
Reviewed by Martha Norkunas.

Somalia in Word and Image is the catalog of the first major exhibition of Somali art and artifacts in the United States. Both the exhibition and the catalog were funded by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education of the Somali Democratic Republic and The National Endowment for the Humanities. I should say that I almost hesitate to call this a catalog for it is really much more, including as it does seven major essays about Somalia, ninety six pages of photographs, (twenty four of which are in color), a selected bibliography and rather detailed footnotes. Having been present at the opening of the exhibition at the Mathers Museum in Bloomington, Indiana, in 1983, I was quite interested in seeing the exhibition’s catalog. The exhibition was absolutely striking: upon the walls of several rooms were very large photographs of Somali people engaged in daily activities, or lost in thought, or walking in the extraordinary landscape of their country. Beneath each photograph was a quotation from one of Somalia’s many poets. I think it was the beauty of the poetry, in conjunction with the simple clarity and force of the photos which so moved me. One of my favorite examples was fortunately included in the catalog (although it is not clear if the poems accompany the same photos in the catalog that they did in the exhibition). A young woman, wrapped in a red and white cloth, is seated at
the far right of a large black window. She is quietly and intently gazing at the camera. The poem beneath reads:

I bade you farewell. Wished you a journey full of blessing; Every hour you exist, when you go to sleep and when you awake Keep in mind the troth between us I am waiting for you, come safely back, come safely back
(Excerpt from a poem by Maxamuud Tukaale)

The point of the exhibition, according to the introduction, was to relate the little-known material culture of Somalia with its rich oral tradition. The catalog was to act as a documentation of the artifacts in the exhibition, and to give the reader a flavor of the environments in which the artifacts play a role.

The essays cover a range of topics. John Johnson, an American scholar who was active in preparing the exhibition, wrote the introduction. It does what an introduction should: He describes the people of Somalia and then gives a general description of the articles included in the catalog. Mary Jo Arnold’s "The Artistic Heritage of Somalia" is a very general overview of Somali poetry, aqal (nomadic houses), women’s woven mats, headrests, domestic objects, jewelry, carving, cloth, and some of the little-studied artifacts of the southern part of Somalia. While informative, the essay is perhaps a bit too general. "Somali Verbal and Material Arts" is an unusual look at the topic from an insider’s point of view. Said Sheikh Samatar counters the Western explanation that the importance of poetry in Somalia lies in providing entertainment to nomads in bleak surroundings with a full discussion of his rationale for the pervasive force of poetry there. The fourth essay, by the Somali specialist B.W. Andrzejewski, succinctly moves from a discussion of the unus-
ual features of Somali oral literature to its functional and thematic aspects, to a look at the impact of radio, drama, and the written word on Somali oral literature. Lee V. Cassanelli writes of the culture and society of the neglected southern region of Somalia in his "Society and Culture of the Riverine Region of Southern Somalia." A curator of an ethnographic museum possessing many Somali artifacts, Vinigi L. Grottanelli describes "Somali Wood Engravings." Despite the Muslim proscription against depicting human and animal forms, and the nomad's contempt for material goods, the Somalis express their appreciation of "formal beauty" through wood carving (nonrepresentational, of course). Grottanelli gives examples of the kinds of objects which are carved, their function, and traces the origins of the design elements used. The final essay, by another renowned scholar, I.M. Lewis, is a short look at Islam in Somalia. The differences between Islam in the nomadic north and the pastoral south are addressed, as are the compromises between Somali culture and Islam. Lewis looks briefly at Sufi orders in Somalia, the importance of jihadis, and women in Islam.

There are also four photo sections interspersed throughout the catalog. Some are photos of the artifacts which were exhibited, some are historical photographs and drawings, and others are scenes of Somali life. The photographs of Somalia are beautiful and descriptive. The artifacts, while portrayed very well visually, suffer from the unavoidable difficulty of exhibitions and catalogs: It is hard to imagine them in context. While the authors occasionally discuss such items, they do not refer to the photos in the text, which would have been helpful. The photographs and the articles in the catalog, like the exhibition, are directed towards the nonspecialist. While some general knowledge about Africa would be helpful in interpreting
the information provided, it is not a prerequisite. The value of the catalog might have been enhanced had an article about some of Somalia's oral poets been included, or some specific biographical information about its artisans. Such personalized information may have compensated for the "lack of context" problem. Nonetheless, as in the exhibition, the catalog illustrates the richness of Somali material culture, and captures the eloquence of its people.


Reviewed by Regina Bendix.

Although socially marginal, theater tackles the most fundamental issues in society, cutting across otherwise firmly established divisions. It would seem, then, that social scientists would be keen on contributing their outlook to the literary scholars' text and author-centered analyses of the theater. But though theater analogies have been frequently used even in folkloristics, theater proper has received far less attention than analyses of ritual, narrative, or everyday interaction as if they were theater. Constricting folklore definitions have made it difficult to include a phenomenon as amorphous as theater, and thus folk theater has led a marginal existence in the discipline as well. The two books reviewed here contribute to